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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Welcome to *How to Use Discussion in the Classroom: The Complete Guide*. Contained within is a wealth of practical ideas which teachers can pick up and begin using immediately, no matter what age group they teach, or what area of the curriculum they specialise in.

This is a book which will help you to improve your own classroom practice, as well as the learning experience of your students.

Everything has been written with the busy teacher in mind. The strategies, techniques and activities which follow are all ready-to-use and take account of the practicalities of day-to-day teaching.

This is a book which will help you to be a brilliant teacher.

It is a book which will help you to raise achievement.

It is a book that will help you to make your classroom an engaging, motivational environment in which learning is at the top of everyone's agenda.

If you want to dive straight in, head to chapter 2: Strategies and Techniques. The practical material starts there. It continues in chapter 3: Activities.

Chapter 2 explains and exemplifies twenty strategies and techniques which can be used to facilitate high-quality discussion. It also outlines extensions and developments for each of these.

Chapter 3 does exactly the same except with twenty classroom activities. Each one of these is generic and simply requires the teacher to insert

whatever subject-specific content they want students to think about and talk about.

Chapter 4 does the same but with a further twenty activities. I have split the chapters in order to make navigation easier. A brief conclusion draws the book to a close.

If you want to explore discussion before looking at how to use it, keep reading this introduction. Three aspects are briefly outlined. They are:

- ◆ The relative strengths and weaknesses of the three generic discussion-types: paired discussion, group discussion and whole-class discussion.
- ◆ The relationships between speaking, writing, thinking and knowledge.
- ◆ The ideas of three key theorists – John Dewey, Neil Mercer and Lev Vygotsky – which inform many of the ideas in this book.

I have not chosen to include a specific section in which the case is made for discussion as a teaching method. This is because the argument is advanced by the book as a whole and because I believe such a section would detract from the central focus: practical strategies ready to be used by teachers in their classrooms, no matter what it is they are teaching.

Of course, it is up to you how you use the book. My own suggestion would be to see it as a compendium of ideas which can be taken on and embedded in your own pedagogy or used to plan engaging, inspiring and enjoyable lessons. However you choose to use it, I am sure that it will bring significant benefits to your professional practice and to the learning experience of your students.

Paired, Group and Whole-Class Discussion

In the activities section of this book you can find many examples of how to structure discussion. Paired, group and whole-class discussion can also be generic, though. Knowing when to opt for one method in favour of another is a skill which teachers develop over time. What follows is broad guidance that should be taken in conjunction with the understanding that comes (or will come, depending what stage of your career you are at) with experience.

Paired discussion is a valuable aid to whole-class teaching. It can be used with ease throughout a lesson. The only requirement is that pupils can find a partner quickly and that disruption is kept to a minimum. This usually means students working with the person who is sat next to them; it may sometimes involve one or more students moving or turning around.

The great benefit of using paired discussion is that the teacher rarely has to create any resources or establish a detailed structure. They can simply indicate a question, statement or topic which is to be talked about before requesting that students discuss it with their partner. Here is an example:

Teacher: OK, before we start to investigate the functions of the digestive system, turn to your partner and discuss what you think the functions might be.

Such an instruction is likely to come near the start of the lesson. A further example:

Teacher: In a moment we will review what we have learnt this lesson. First, I would like you to spend five minutes discussing your work with your partner. Identify what you think you have done well and what could be improved. Find evidence to support what you say.

This instruction would come near the end of a lesson. It contains more detail than the first one and, as a result, will lead to a more structured discussion; there is a precise purpose, which is to underpin what students do. This differs from the first case, in which the teacher's intention was to elicit students' prior knowledge.

Paired discussion is of benefit to pupils as well as being useful for teachers. This book makes clear what can be achieved through a pedagogy which includes discussion. By giving students the opportunity to discuss in pairs, the teacher is allowing the greatest number of pupils the chance to share their thoughts and to explore their understanding.

Speaking and listening are the rudiments of discussion. Because only one person is allowed to speak at a time, all forms of discussion will see the majority of students listening. Paired discussion, in which every 'group' consists of only two members, allows all members of a class the greatest opportunity to speak. Students are competing for air-time with only one other person and a discussion will not ensue unless both parties

accept that they will have to make a contribution. Paired discussion is thus a powerful tool for ensuring all students in a class are able to participate fully in debate.

The final thing to note before we move on is that paired discussion tends to work well as a starting point for other activities or tasks. The two examples given above both demonstrate this. Of course, paired discussion can stand alone – just as it can be highly structured or supplemented by extra resources – but, generally, it will work in concert with another activity or as part of a tapestry of tasks or processes. It is a technique as much as an independent entity; one which the teacher can use to develop thinking, elicit knowledge or lead into other pieces of work.

In contrast to paired discussion, group discussion usually requires more structure and greater planning. There is one important reason for this.

When students are grouped in threes, fours or fives (the traditional numbers found in group activities) there is the potential for some pupils to disengage, leaving it to others to do the work. When challenged on this, many will point to the fact that other members of the group are taking part in discussion as a justification for their own behaviour. The rationale is that as long as the work is being done then everything is OK.

For us as teachers this is obviously not the case. Our aim is to have all members of the class engaged in whatever work has been set so that they are all learning. For the teacher, the work is not instrumental. It is an end in itself. As such, it is important to forestall the unwanted behaviour to which group discussion may give rise. This can be done through careful planning which includes things such as:

- ◆ Allocating roles
- ◆ Providing a structure which encompasses all participants
- ◆ Separating the group discussion into mini-discussions which are subsequently shared
- ◆ Thinking carefully about which students are grouped together
- ◆ Providing discussion topics which are accessible to all

Despite requiring extra prior input from the teacher, group discussion in action tends to see students given greater freedom and independence. For the method to be worthwhile, the teacher needs to step back. Having

provided a structure for the discussion, they must leave pupils to their own devices (while maintaining a watchful eye, of course).

In group discussion, there is a greater ceding of control by the teacher than is the case in either paired or whole-class discussion. Two points arise from this. First, the teacher must be *prepared* to cede control. Group discussion will be severely impeded if the teacher keeps intervening, for example, by continually drawing the class's attention in order to make teaching points. The main purpose of group discussion, it may be argued, is for students to lead their own learning through a framework set out by the teacher.

Second, there may be some classes where the behaviour issues which result from the ceding of control outweigh any benefits. In these cases there are two options open to the teacher:

1. Attempt to train the class over a period of time so that they are capable of discussing successfully in groups. This will involve the gradual introduction of group elements to discussion tasks and the establishing of ground rules in paired and whole-class discussion which can be transferred to group discussion.
2. Do not do group discussion with the class. This is not the end of the world; you can still use paired and whole-class discussion as well as a range of other activities. It is better to acknowledge that a certain class struggles with an activity type than to continue using it despite the problems which it throws up.

Drawing the previous few points together, we can note that group discussion carries higher risks than paired and whole-class discussion, but that it also has higher pay-offs as well. A really successful group discussion – in which three, four or five students are exploring ideas, challenging one another and working in unison to construct knowledge and develop understanding – is an incredibly rich learning experience. That is why, despite the potential difficulties which come with the approach, it is worth pursuing.

We turn finally to whole-class discussion. This usually sees the teacher standing at the front of the room with the whole class sat before them (an alternative approach sees teacher and students sat together in a large circle).

It is a method which allows the teacher to retain the maximum level of control over their pupils. They are the focal point for the class and in a position to direct proceedings. This can include a stipulation that all comments must pass through the teacher (in as much as they will choose who is to speak).

The approach is good for establishing wider ground rules which subsequently permeate all other types of discussion. These usually include the following guiding principles: only one person is to speak at any one time, and all contributions and contributors are to be treated with respect. The teacher's role as head of the discussion (judge, facilitator, director) allows them to deal with rule breaches and to praise students for doing the right thing.

One of the biggest benefits of whole-class discussion is that it has the greatest possible number of contributors. This means there is the potential for students to hear a diversity of opinions which may not be accessible in paired or group discussion. Exposure to a wide range of ideas is likely to lead to developments in understanding (not least by greying that which might previously have been viewed as black and white). It is also likely to encourage creative thinking. Bringing disparate perspectives together may give rise to original thoughts. This is because a larger number of contributions will mean a larger number of potential contribution-combinations. Innovative or unusual suggestions often come forth due to the sheer increase in numbers.

The last point to note concerning whole-class discussion is that it has greater theatricality than paired or group discussion. The teacher, at the front of the class, is in a position to embellish and dramatize contributions which students make (or which they themselves provide). This presents the opportunity to engage and motivate pupils. The teacher can draw them into the discussion through the use of rhetorical devices, acting and oratory. What is more, students can take advantage of this, if they wish, by using such techniques themselves, from wherever they are sitting or standing (though this is reliant to some extent on other pupils turning to look at them while they are speaking. The teacher may make this behaviour a rule and enforce it on the basis that it shows respect for the speaker and demonstrates active listening).

Speaking, Thinking, Writing and Knowledge

The infant child does not possess the power to articulate that which occurs inside of itself. One of the most difficult tasks parents first encounter is trying to establish what it is their baby wants when it exhibits distress, most often in the form of crying. They wish to ascertain this knowledge so that they can alter the situation; the desire to nurture a child physically and emotionally, to tend to its needs, is the overriding drive in nearly all parents.

On a brute rendering we may think of an infant's distress as their signal that all is not well. But what is it that is not well? It can only be something internal (such as the feeling of hunger) or external (such as loud noises heard through an open window). Yet, even in a case where the child's distress is caused by external stimuli, the experience of distress is still an internal one.

Let us imagine, for example, that a window has been left open to allow some fresh air into the house. After a time, the infant who is in the adjoining room begins to feel a draft. This makes them uncomfortable. They react to this discomfort by beginning to cry. Despite the fact, however, that this has been caused by an external stimulus (the cold air), the experience of the stimulus is still internal to the child. If the child's mother entered the room and happened, for some reason, to be insensitive to temperature, she would be hard pressed to identify the cause of the child's distress without undertaking a course of trial and error or a detailed examination of all the potential variables which could be affecting her son or daughter.

It is likely that the mother's presence, her picking up and holding of the baby, her talking and tending, would be sufficiently soothing to dispel the discomfort or anxiety which has occurred. It may be that through some method or other she could come to a conclusion about the role of the open window in causing her child's discomfort. What could certainly not happen, though, is any articulation by the baby of why it felt in distress.

Fast forward fifty years; she (let us say the baby was a girl by the name of Emily) who was once an infant is now a woman, and a poet to boot. Her latest collection includes a sonnet entitled 'Low Tide on Sandsend Beach'. In one particular couplet she evokes the experience of cold sea

air running across naked arms, imbuing this with a sense and symbolism which it will take many readings to unravel. In an interview about her new book she explains how this particular part of the poem found its genesis in a brief conversation she had with a friend while visiting the Yorkshire Coast.

That which is internal to us – thoughts, sensations, feelings and emotions – can be made plain through language. Speech comes first. It is the precursor to writing. It is the means by which we communicate that which is inside us, and that which we experience, to others. The greater command one has over the spoken word, the more accurately one is able to give voice to one's own thoughts.

Just as language – speech – articulates thoughts, so too does it come to order and inform them. Think, for example, of the differing explanations a child and an adult might be able to provide of an event they both experience. The latter is a more knowledgeable and a more skilful user of language. This means that even before they share the same experience as the child, they will be primed to interpret it through a different (more developed) framework.

Using discussion in the classroom is important as it provides students with the opportunity to enhance their own frameworks of interpretation as well as their own skills in articulating that which they think, feel, sense or experience. This in turn has a knock-on effect on a student's ability to write.

The benefits of using discussion to precede writing are outlined elsewhere in this book. The central tenet is that the process of speaking about a subject allows one to manipulate one's thoughts about that subject. This means that writing about it is made easier; much of the hard work has already been done. Such work includes analysis, synthesis and evaluation of that which one thinks and knows about the topic in question. The ephemeral, instantly editable, unmediated nature of speech means that one can do things with it quickly and simply. Even the most skilled of writers will struggle to match this immediacy and easiness when manipulating the written word.

Let us consider an example through which we can demonstrate the benefits to be had from talking before writing.

Students are given the task of producing an essay which deals with the question of whether or not Queen Victoria was a good monarch. They are asked to discuss their ideas and to develop an essay plan. The following series of events might reasonably be expected to occur:

- ◆ Students discuss the question. They consider what the question means and how one might go about answering it. They also analyse some of the key words (in this case, the word 'good' is most at issue).
- ◆ Students discuss in further detail how to answer the question. They exchange ideas and then develop a single one in concert. They sketch a plan and then identify what one should write about and why.
- ◆ Students discuss the essay plan. They try to assess what exactly it is that the teacher wants. They exchange ideas about how best to write a plan. They then decide to write a plan together, using speech to develop their ideas.

By this point, students will each have an essay plan which they can use to structure their written work. The process of discussion will have led them to engage in a variety of tasks which could have been missed, made more difficult or taken far longer if no talking had been allowed.

What is more, if Student A and Student B engaged in discussion, it is highly likely that one or both will have said things of which the other simply hadn't thought (and, perhaps, never would have done). For example, Student A may have suggested that 'good' should be taken as referring to the things which Victoria did while Queen. Student B may have then interjected, pointing out that some of the things she did were viewed as good by some people and as bad by others.

The two main benefits which teachers and students can extract from the relationship between speech and writing are:

1. The improvements in thinking which are likely to result from hearing different people's ideas about a topic.
2. The speed and simplicity with which one can carry out intellectual work on a topic by talking about it (whether this is to precede writing or not).